Rise of the Rest

10 MAY 2026

Lauren Mc Hugh



Photo: August de Richelieu via Pexels

Introduction

This article examines how small states can use economic and cultural power to leverage influence during periods of international uncertainty. Using Ireland as a case study, this essay aims to demonstrate how derivative ties to a great power can serve positive sum gains to both the small and great power. Given that the current international rules-based order is transforming the current US administration, this article will use Irish-US relations to highlight how being 'small' relies on strong relational ties with key allies, especially great powers. This article addresses the following research question:

To what extent does international uncertainty expand the capacity of small states to exercise influence, and through which mechanisms is this influence operationalised?

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing on secondary literature and empirical evidence from Irish–US relations to illustrate broader theoretical dynamics in small-state behaviour. It proceeds in three parts: first, it reconceptualises small-state power under conditions of systemic uncertainty; second, it identifies key mechanisms through which Ireland converts structural asymmetry into influence; and third, it reinterprets the 'Rise of the Rest' narrative through a small-state lens.

This paper argues that uncertainty in international relations does not mean 'decline', but rather it allows small states to create niche areas of influence with strategic cultural, economic and relational aspects to exercise disproportionate influence. In the following argument, uncertainty refers to the weakening of US commitments to the liberal order, fragmentation of rules-based institutions and the increased unpredictability with the wider multipolar transition. As such, this will be highlighted by Ireland's ties with the US from a historical standpoint and its increasing relevance for Irish foreign policy today under the Trump administration. This article advances the argument that **international uncertainty can enhance, rather than diminish, the capacity of small states to exercise** influence, particularly when they are able to convert structural asymmetries into forms of derivative, collective and normative power. Building on recent advances in small-state theory, it demonstrates that influence is not reducible to material capabilities alone, but can be generated through relational positioning, institutional embeddedness, and reputational capital (Long, 2017). In this context, small states are not merely passive rule-takers; they can act as brokers, amplifiers, and stabilisers within an evolving international order. However, Ireland has been selected as a unique case study, in that it possesses long -standing historical and cultural affinity with the US that other small, advanced countries may lack. It serves as a reminder to scholarly literature that historical identity may still matter just as much as material interests, especially the presidential identity in the case of the US-Ireland. The US Presidents Biden and Trump, as the most recent examples, have unique ties in Ireland that serve two distinct purposes. The latter has majority economic interests in Ireland, with Trump Doonbeg golf course generating part of the Trump real estate empire. Whereas former President Biden has been dubbed one of the most Irish presidents in history, maybe second to John F Kennedy. Biden's infamous remark during the election campaign in 2020 he was asked by Nick Bryant for a "quick word for the BBC". He swiftly replied: "The BBC? I'm Irish!" (Smith, BBC News, p.1) While this should not be the basis for which economic policy decisions are made in favour of Ireland, it does indicate a certain sympathetic and there-

fore advantageous influence for Ireland in many ways that will be explained in this article.

Rethinking order and small states in international relations

Furthermore, this article challenges Walz's claim that the international system is dominated by great powers, arguing that in times of order uncertainty, conditions that small states are able to exploit for increased influence (Waltz, 1979).[10] [LM11] This is primarily focused on their ability to uphold the international norms and multilateralism needed to sustain a rules-based international order. Underpinning this is international cooperation. Small states have little to gain from binaries such as 'East versus West', which have immersed themselves in international relations since the end of the Second World War (Long, 2017). Rather, small states must continue to leverage their positions in multilateral institutions, especially the UN, where they can facilitate collective dialogue and consensus-building of international norms to produce a positive-sum game within the system (Lupel et al, 2024,).[12]

Furthermore, in creating new visions of international order, small states must be a key part of the calculations. A recent Chatham House report entitled the 'competing visions of international order' examines the changing nature of the US's role alongside 11 allies in deciphering the characteristics for the future (Vinjamuri et al., 2025).[13] Notably, this literature fails to mention any 'small state' or collective region of smaller states, for example, the Balkans, in its assessment of the future expectations of the international community. They note that 'emerging and middle power now can shape and affect outcomes at a regional level' yet had previously noted that power is far more dispersed than at any point since the Second World War (Vinjamuri et al., 2025, p. 117). Therefore, it begs the question, why are small states not part of the conversation? What follows in the next section is the mechanism that illustrates how Ireland can attribute power and influence in relation to the US, and subsequently on the international stage.

Mechanisms for small states

Ireland is a critical case study illustrating the aforementioned selective influence small states can project amid international uncertainty. For Ireland, it has developed a foreign policy position that leverages its economic interdependence and cultural relations with the US to exert influence disproportionate to its size. This concept will be explored through the following mechanisms through which this influence is exercised: diaspora politics and transatlantic economic interdependence.

Diaspora networks and politics assess

The following section will examine the mechanisms that Ireland uses to create 'order' in international politics. Firstly, the diaspora networks that have been laid in the US since the famine of the 1840s. From this, the annual

St Patrick's Day celebration of Ireland's patron saint is marked between An Taoiseach (Irish prime minister) and the US President each year. The US Congress has proclaimed March as the Irish American Heritage month since 1991, with 10.4% of the US population claiming Irish ancestry in 2014 (US Census Bureau, 2016). It was made clear from Marco Rubio's Munich speech (2026) that the current US administration emphasised cultural alignment and historical values between Europe and the US. Arguably, in these terms, no stronger alliance exists than between the US and Ireland; a relationship characterised by diaspora politics, understanding of economic ties, shared values and diplomatic practices. As such, Ireland has taken on key roles in these areas to bolster relations, and as this article argues, will allow it to maintain influence with the global superpower and fellow international states.

Unique to the Irish-US relationship is the fact that the diaspora communities function as political networks that shape political elite preferences, coupled with privileged access to the decision-making process rather than just a cultural asset (White et al., 2019). In this case, the Irish American community comprises 32.4 million individuals who claim Irish ancestry (Smyth, O'Dwyer, 2023). The culmination of this influence is on St Patrick's Day, March 17th, with meetings between the Irish and American leaders that are not only subject to ceremonial importance but rather they serve as a functional role to maintain access and symbolic legitimacy within the US foreign policy circles (White et al., 2019). For current data, the US Census states that 32.4 million US residents, or 9.5%, claimed Irish ancestry in 2024, meaning that Presidents have a political imperative to tap into the 'Irishness' given the electoral leverage that this section of the population possesses (US Census Bureau, 2026).

Figure 1: map overview of Irish American heritage numbers and where they are most densely located in the US, source: https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2016/cb16-ff04.html.

The extent to which these Irish-US networks influence politics is within the context of the Northern Irish peace process in the 1990s. The institutionalisation of the Congressional Friends of Ireland organisation led by Tip O'Neill and Ted Kennedy played a critical role in reframing US policy towards Northern Ireland in a mediation-orientated approach (White et al., 2019). This shift from traditional deference to British sovereignty towards the interventionists model was built from the lobbying efforts of the Irish American elites and advocacy organisations. Irish American political actors were instrumental in facilitating direct U.S. diplomatic engagement. Throughout the early 1990s, lobbying from diaspora-linked networks contributed to President Bill Clinton's decision to grant a visa to Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams in 1994; a highly controversial move that signalled a departure from prior U.S. policy and helped legitimise republican participation in negotiations (Mc Loughlin, 2023) More broadly, Irish-American advocacy was critical in embedding Northern Ireland within U.S. foreign

policy priorities, creating the political conditions under which sustained diplomatic involvement became viable.

Economic Interdependence

A second mechanism through which Ireland exercises influence lies in its deeply embedded economic relationship with the United States. Ireland is attractive for US foreign direct investment for three main reasons, according to this author: low corporation tax, access to the European single market, and an English-speaking workforce. Since the 1990s, US multinational corporations have been the bedrock for Ireland's growth with 970 US companies employing close to 211,000 people directly supporting another 168,00 jobs indirectly, equating to over 12% of the total Irish workforce (Walsh, 2025). However, crucial to this argument is the fact that this is not a one-way stream from the hegemon; Ireland is the sixth largest investor in the US (Walsh, 2025). Moreover, around 203,000 people are employed in the US by Irish companies highlighting the strong interconnectedness of these two economies (Cockerill, 2025).

This reciprocal investment relationship complicates simplistic dependency narratives. Rather than being unilaterally dependent on US capital, Ireland occupies a position of strategic brokerage, facilitating flows of investment, innovation, and market access between the United States and the European Union. This intermediary role enhances Ireland's structural relevance within the transatlantic economy, providing it with a degree of leverage in shaping regulatory discussions, tax negotiations, and broader economic policy debates.

Figure 2: comparative table summarising both countries economic footprint, American Chamber of Commerce Ireland, 2025. Source: https://assets.ireland.ie/documents/IrelandsEconomicFootprintUSA.pdf.

Notably, this article does not wish to overstate the 'Irish impact', but it does acknowledge that this economic interdependence reinforces Ireland's political significance. As Farrell and Newman 2019 argue, states that occupy central positions within global economic networks can derive influence from their capacity to control or mediate critical nodes of interdependence (Farrell, Newman, 2019). In sum, Ireland punches above its weight. Taken together, these mechanisms demonstrate that small-state influence is not derived from any single resource, but from the strategic interaction between relational, economic and institutional forms of power.

Challenging the traditional 'rise of the rest' narrative

In international relations, the 'Rise of the Rest' narrative is employed to depict the rise of non-Western, predominantly non-democratic states as an indication of Western decline. However, this article reinterprets this term to argue that it could be an internal rise within the West to pay more attention to smaller counterparts that are the bedrock of the order. The traditional

'Rise of the Rest" narrative often adopts a zero-sum perspective: as non-Western powers gain share in global GDP and military spending, the West, specifically the United States, is seen as being in terminal decline (Zarakol, 2003, 32). She suggests that the 'Rest' is not a monolith but a fragmented group of actors with varying interests. When we frame the rise of others as an automatic source of disorder, we ignore the possibility that these rising actors might actually seek to uphold or refine international norms rather than dismantle them.

Ireland has been used as an example to show that peripheral small states can exercise agency. Ireland's trajectory is a 'return to order' because it demonstrates how small states can stabilise the international system during periods of transition. Rather than adding to the 'disorder' that realists fear when hegemonies shift, Ireland utilises its neutrality and diplomatic credibility to facilitate dialogue. By acting as a 'norm entrepreneur', Ireland ensures that the 'Rise of the Rest' includes a commitment to the rule of law. Rather than signalling systemic decline, the diffusion of power creates interstitial spaces in which small states can exercise stabilising influence, particularly through norm entrepreneurship and multilateral engagement. It suggests that the future global order may not be a chaotic struggle between giants, but a more complex, networked system where small actors maintain the threads of cooperation (Smith et al, 2005).[15]

Conclusion

This article has argued that prevailing assumptions about small-state vulnerability under conditions of international uncertainty are analytically incomplete. Rather than uniformly constraining their agency, periods of systemic flux can expand the strategic space available to small states, enabling them to exercise influence through relational, institutional and normative channels. Drawing on the case of Ireland, the analysis has demonstrated how such influence is generated through the interaction of diaspora-linked political access and transatlantic economic interdependence. Ultimately, small states do not reshape the international order in the manner of great powers. However, they play a critical role in determining how order adapts, persists and functions in practice – being a small state matter.

Reference List

American Chamber of Commerce Ireland. (2025). A Partnership that delivers.

Coakley, Liam. (2025). The 'Global Ireland' Policy Platform, Small Island Developing States and the Geopolitics of an Interstitial Ireland. Irish Geography 57 (1).

Dempsey, G. T. (1993). Irish Attitudes Towards USA Foreign Policy Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review 82, no. 327: 265–75.

Farrell, H and Newman, A. (2019). Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion, International Security 44, no. 1. 42–79.

Keohane, Robert O. (1969). Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics. International Organization 23, no. 2 291–310.
Lupel, Adam, Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, and Joel Ng. (2024). The Future of Multilateralism: Recommendations for Small States. Small States and the Multilateral System: Transforming Global Governance for a Better Future. International Peace Institute.
Long, Tom. (2017). Small States, Great Power? Gaining Influence Through Intrinsic, Derivative, and Collective Power. International Studies Review 19, no. 2. 185–205.
Smith, Nicola, Michelle Pace, and Donna Lee. (2005). Size Matters: Small States and International Studies. International Studies Perspectives 6, no. 3.
Smith, Sarah. (April, 2023). Why Ireland is soon important to Joe Biden. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-65197578.
White, T., & Pausa, E. (2019). When did the Irish American Diaspora Make a Difference? Influencing US Diplomacy toward Northern Ireland. SHILAP Revista De Lepidopterología.
Vinjamuri et, al. (2025). Competing visions of international order', Chatham House. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025-03-27-competing-visions-international-order-vinjamuri-et-al.pdf
Zarakol, Ayşe. (2017). Theorising Hierarchies: An Introduction. In In Hierarchies in World Politics, (pp. 1–14). Cambridge University Press.

EPIS